

CHAPTER VII

PARENTS AND CHILDREN

ARE children gods or kings that older people should tremble over them?" was the way one village woman reacted to what she considered the newfangled ideas of child rearing taught by the village doctor. Another woman said to me, "Why should so much be made of children when there is no sense of their living in such a heavy life?"

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These attitudes reflected themselves in the statistics of infant mortality, which were given in Chapter II but deserve repetition. Back in 1926 one out of every five babies born alive died during its first year; this figure had fallen to one out of every eight in 1941, but was still much higher than the United States rate of one out of twenty-two. But the birth rate too has been falling. When I first went to Bulgaria in 1929 I found village after village where 45 babies were born annually for every thousand people. This number has fallen to around 30 for Dragalevtsy and 21 for Bulgaria as a whole. The United States rate was about 23 in 1946.

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Childhood was a period to live through, not especially to enjoy. Bulgarian peasants, if they ever had given thought to it, would probably have agreed with the results of some of the American studies which suggested that childhood was not necessarily the happiest time of life. In Dragalevtsy it was, in fact, the period of greatest uncertainty and insecurity. The Dragalevtsy child early learned the basic principle of action: if you want to stay out of trouble, keep out of the grown-ups' way. The child's greatest errors were those of commission rather than omission.

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"Children are the wealth of the poor. They are for God and for the peasants and so why should we worry about special care for them?" said one woman who realized that the townspeople had smaller families in spite of greater comforts. Her statement also showed how her

855 people had reconciled themselves to comparative poverty: abundance of children in contrast to the abundance of goods. When I asked her if they gave the children any special food, she answered: "No, certainly not. They eat the same food as the older people. If they want to eat, we let them eat. If they do not want to eat, who is to be blamed?" Children's mealtimes were a matter of convenience. They asked for food when they were hungry, receiving a crust of bread if the adult was not too busy.

The mother-in-law usually took care of the children, especially while they were babies, because she was considered more capable and experienced than the young mother. There were cases in the village where a comparatively young mother-in-law took such complete care of her son's children that the mother of the children did not know what it meant to have children and to care for them.

When people went to work in the fields and there was no woman to remain with them in the home, the children were left by themselves on the streets.

"Doesn't the Village Council do anything to aid these children?" I asked.

"Oh, the *Obshtina* takes care of some children, but what can it do when it is not from the same blood? It is only to shut the eyes and the mouths of the peasants for the very high taxes they pay to the *Obshtina*."

The children were not well dressed. Their clothes were often dirty and ragged. One tired mother of several complained: "Can a child keep anything on his back clean and not torn? Now you put on his back something clean and new, and when he returns from playing in the street it is all wet, dirty, and often torn. So children do not deserve to have good and new clothes." Often their clothes were made out of garments discarded by adults, though they did receive new garments at Christmas.

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593 But even though the peasants did not "tremble over" their children, they valued them highly. When they first came they were tokens of a successful marriage. The husband and wife had both borne fruit and so had conformed to the expected life cycle. As the children grew older, however, they became important as economic

591 If a daughter failed to marry, she spent the rest of her life in
562 her father's home and received sympathy only as long as her mother
was alive. Her father and married brothers thought of her as a servant
in the home and treated her accordingly. Fortunately there was rarely
more than one old maid at a time in Dragalevtsy.

593 The treatment of younger children, of course, varied greatly with
the home. Children in Dragalevtsy were accustomed to being yelled
●855 at from their first toddling days by displeased older people. As we
562 have already seen, there was no question about boys being preferred
to girls in most homes, especially if there was only one boy among
several girls. In such homes it was the boy who received the presents
when the father returned from town, and who was picked up first; it
was the boy whom the parents held when they asked to be photo-
graphed.

[861] Whipping, which was usually done by the father, was such an
effective check on misbehavior that parents often needed only to
threaten it. Another method of punishment was to withhold bread
from the child for two or three hours, but, as one father said, "This
doesn't always work, especially if the child begins to cry."

[357] Some parents, when they were unable to make ends meet, sent a
girl off to Sofia to work as a domestic. One family revealed that five
years previously a twelve-year-old daughter had been sent to be a
servant in Sofia; she would never return to the village to live, nor
did she ever come to visit. In this case the parents could not support
an extra person, so chose the simplest way out. The fact that many
Bulgarian families in cities sought female servants from twelve to
eighteen years of age made such a practice possible. Indeed, on St.
Dimiter's Day (November 8) and St. George's Day (May 6) there
used to be a "servant bazaar" in Sofia. Village girls went to a certain
place and stood in a row where housewives could look them over
like heifers and choose a maid. Changes in servants, including shep-
herds, were ordinarily made only at these two times during the year.

593 Should parents find a job for a teen-aged boy, the father might
857 require the boy to accept the job. Most boys wanted work; only a few
resented working at all. If a father had more sons than he needed
on the farm, he sometimes chose a trade for or with the boy. Such